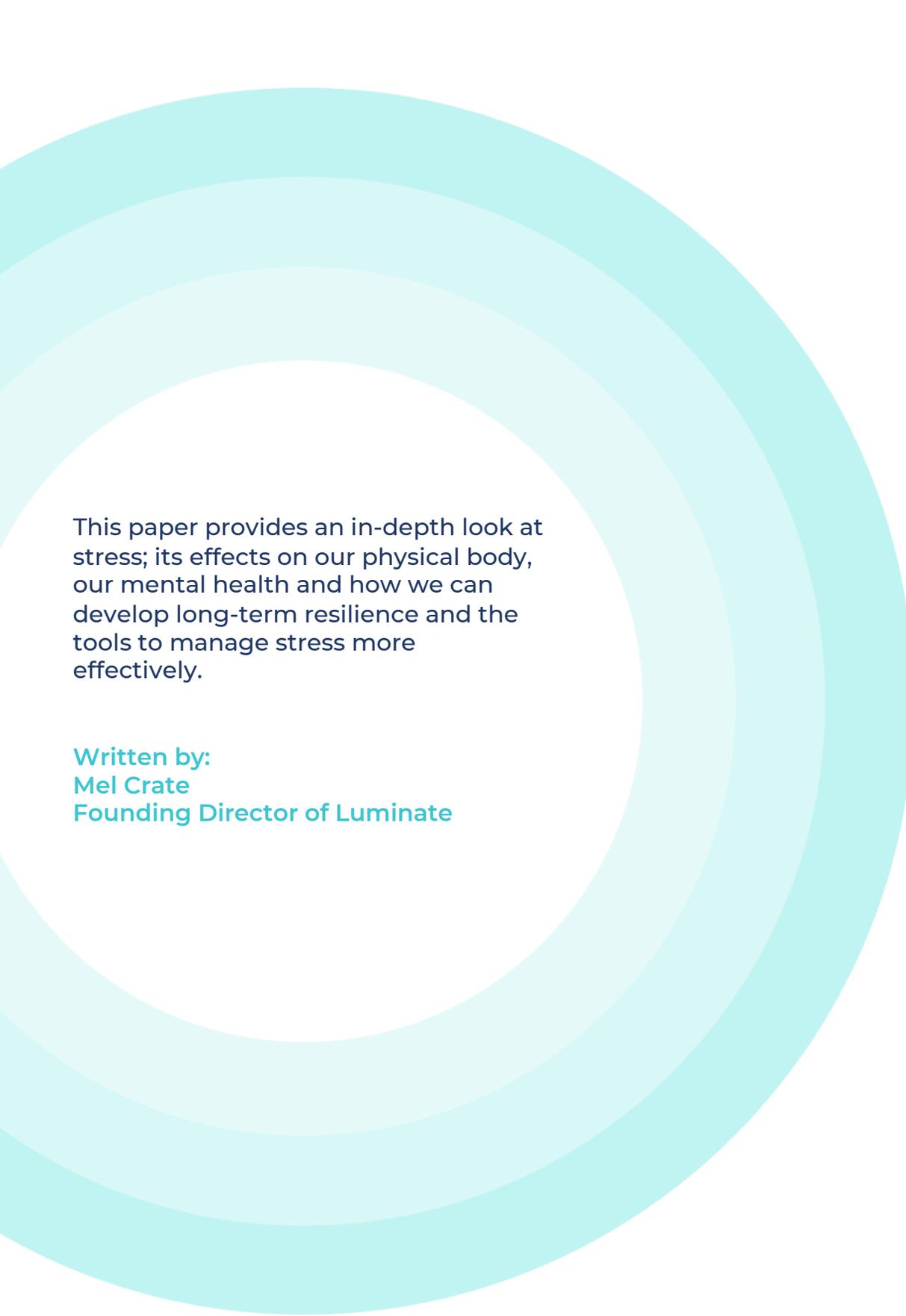




WHITE PAPER

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING, MANAGING AND BEATING STRESS





This paper provides an in-depth look at stress; its effects on our physical body, our mental health and how we can develop long-term resilience and the tools to manage stress more effectively.

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Introduction to stress

1. Introduction to stress

Stress is something that affects most of us on some level. For some of us, it dwarfs our ability to think clearly and in some severe instances it can lead to cases of clinical depression or anxiety, leaving us debilitated for weeks, months, or even years.

We are having to find new ways to combat stress as the condition continues to spread and affect our working and personal lives. As the pressure builds at work and we're exposed to more technology and information than ever before, we need a new set of tools with which to help us navigate this brave new world.

In 2015/16, stress accounted for 37% of all work related ill health cases and 45% of all working days lost due to ill health (The Labour Force Survey 2015-2016). According to a recent survey carried out by the NHS, there was a 14% rise in doctors notes issued relating to anxiety and stress between 2015-16 and 2016-17 and a third of all doctors notes handed out by GPs are now for mental health issues.

We now know much more about how stress affects the brain and body, thanks to the increasingly sophisticated technology available to medical professionals. We already know that stress causes a loss of concentration, motivation and memory, but research tells us that stress now not only impairs the way we think but it can also affect our immune system making us susceptible to both fleeting and more serious illnesses.

Here we will cover: the effects of stress and the damage this can do long term, practical tools for managing stress in the moment and how to develop resilience to combat stress long-term.

Stress & the physical body

2. Stress & the physical body

It is helpful, firstly, to understand the basics of how the brain works and what happens to our thinking and behaviour when we are stressed.

As explained by psychologist Daniel Kahneman, our brain has two modes: fast and slow. To put it very simply, the fast mode tends to use the very quick, instinctive and emotional side of the brain and the slow mode, tends to be the explorative, more deliberate and conscious side of the brain. When we're stressed we tend to operate in fast mode; we can be snappy, impatient and automatic in our behaviour. When we're calm we have the ability to tap into our explorative mode, where we make calculated, considered decisions and are able to behave with better emotional regulation.

Our physical reaction to stress

There is a very legitimate reason why we get stressed and why our brain even possesses the ability to function in this fast mode. It's part of our human survival function; when a predator attacks we don't have time to think rationally about it; we need the ability to think almost automatically to quickly escape danger. You're most likely familiar with the term 'fight or flight mode' When we enter this mode, our body produces a stress hormone called cortisol; our blood sugar spikes, releasing a hit of adrenalin into the blood stream, providing us with the tools we need to either fight or flight a situation.

The problem is our stresses now are much less physical but our brains are not able to distinguish between a real life-threatening situation and a more modern problem such as a looming deadline or a dispute at work. This means we're not burning off the fuel our body provides us when we're in this mode as our lifestyles are so sedentary, often leading to elevated levels of cortisol in our bodies over an extended period of time.

Our fight or flight response also suppresses the immune system, leaving our body susceptible to infections from the common cold to the flu¹. All of this together can eventually can cause or contribute to diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, osteoporosis and dementia.

Scientists have also discovered that chronic stress can shorten our telomeres (a cell structure which affects how and at what rate we age). The length of our telomeres is what dictates how old a person looks and feels. When our telomeres get too short, cells malfunction and and lose their ability to divide, meaning that our tissue can no longer renew itself. The more stressed we feel, the shorter our telomeres get and the quicker we age.

¹Glaser, R. & Kiecolt-Glaser, J.K Nature Reviews Immunology 2005; 5; 243-251

Stress & mental health

3. Stress & mental health

Over extended periods of time stress can lead to anxiety, depression and other mental illnesses. It's easy for our thoughts to snowball once we are stressed and taint everything negatively. Another common symptom of stress is to alienate yourself from social circles which leads to a feeling of disconnectedness and weakens the support network around you.

Researches have found physical differences in the brains of those suffering from stress disorders, with more white matter in some areas of the brain¹. The cells produced by chronic stress disrupts the balance in the brain, causing communication in the brain cells to lose their normal timing, which can cause a myriad of mental disorders.

Stress should be addressed in the early stages if possible to prevent it turning into a chronic condition.

¹Daniela Kaufer, Molecular Psychiatry. 11 February 2014

Recognising stress

4. Recognising stress

When we feel stress arising there are some practical techniques we can use to bring our stress levels down. But the first step is recognising we're stressed. This may seem like an extraordinarily simple task but it is something many of us, in fact struggle with, which is what eventually leads to burnout and overwhelm. If we can recognise and deal with stress in its early stages, we could save ourselves from further physical and mental health problems.

It's worth trying to get familiar with what stress looks like for you personally. Some common physical symptoms are: shortness or shallowness of breath, tension in the facial muscles, clenching the jaw, tension around the shoulders/neck, low energy, rapid heart rate, increased body temperature, loss of appetite, insomnia, headaches, tightness in the chest, sweating palms and a dry mouth.

Our behaviour is also likely to change when we're stressed with some common behavioural symptoms being: impatience, forgetfulness, panic, excessive behaviour, inability to concentrate, irritability, withdrawal, anger or mood swings.

If your instinct would be to power through these symptoms, it's perhaps time to reevaluate how you deal with stress.

Managing stress in the moment

5. Managing stress in the moment

Breathing:

One very effective technique is to work with the breath. When our breath is short and shallow, it sends signals to our brain to tell us there is cause to be alarmed and on edge. We think there is a nearby threat and we therefore start to operate in fast mode, which we've already learnt is not always an effective mode to operate in.

Exercise: next time you feel stress arising, find a quiet place and practice this breathing exercise. Take some very deep breaths into your stomach to the count of four. Count slowly to four on the inhale and count slowly to four on the exhale. Take in as much oxygen as possible, controlling the inhale and exhale to ensure they are slow and steady. Repeat 5-6 times.

This will send calming signals to the brain to say the threat has passed and you can go back to using the slow (more controlled) part of your brain. It's a simple exercise but it has proven to be extremely effective.

Physical movement:

We've already learnt that when you feel stressed, your body releases cortisol. The best way to diffuse the cortisol is to physically move the body. If you have the luxury, go to the gym, for a run or take a yoga class. If not a brisk walk around the block will do the trick. When you are exercising or walking, try to keep the mind focused on the physical sensations of moving the body (for example, the feet hitting the ground during a run), your surroundings (what can you notice about the area that you haven't noticed before), the temperature of the air and the sounds you can hear. This will also help clear the mind so you return to your desk feeling calm and refreshed.

Distancing:

Another technique we can use is distancing. If we are facing a specific problem that is causing us stress, we can try and solve the problem as if it wasn't our own.

We're usually much better at giving advice when the problem is someone else's but practical solutions often evade us when the problem is our own. Distancing yourself from the problem can be an effective tool in solving problems and managing crises.

Try to imagine the problem as someone else's. Write down the practical issues you are facing, then imagine these issues belong to someone else. You can imagine a real life person to help make it more realistic (a CEO/ colleague you respect) and then think about what you would advise them in this scenario.

By detaching yourself from your problem, you may have a bit more clarity on what an effective solution might be as you're not in the midst of it.

Building resilience

6. Building resilience

Resilience is a key factor in dealing with stress. Having high resilience levels means we are able to deal with the trials and tribulations that life throws at us without becoming derailed or overwhelmed. The good news is, that our resilience isn't fixed. We can grow our resilience through a range of exercises and experiences.

Many of us are forced to become resilient through unfortunate events like bereavement, divorce, illness or trauma. But we can also grow our resilience by putting ourselves in challenging situations like taking on a gruelling physical challenge, gaining a difficult qualification like a PHD or even by having and raising children. In fact, the more time we spend outside our comfort zones, the more resilient we are likely to become.

For Britons in particular, there are many situations in life that can make us feel awkward and uncomfortable – it can be something as small as catching someone's eye at the wrong time or as big as having to speak in public. For the most part we try and avoid these situations as we don't like feeling awkward. But putting ourselves in situations that take us outside of our comfort zones can help us become more resilient. Through this, we get used to operating in volatile, uncertain and ambiguous circumstances, which is often what we're faced with at difficult times in life. The more time you spend in the zone of discomfort, the more equipped you'll be to live with unpredictability.

It may start with small things like speaking up in a meeting when there is something you disagree with or striking up conversation with a stranger, or bigger things like running a marathon or taking an evening class, but every time you take yourself outside your comfort zone you're building resilience, which will help you overcome challenges as they arise in life.

Changing our attitude towards failure is key to becoming more resilient and being able to deal with setbacks in life. Inevitably we will fail time and time again, whether that involves being rejected for a job you wanted, a business venture failing or breaking up with a partner.

All of these things could be viewed as failures but they can also be seen as opportunities. Opportunities to learn, grow and develop as human beings. With this mindset, we will welcome failure and lessen our fear of it, meaning we are more likely to take risks and try new things.

Lastly, an important factor to building resilience and reducing mental health issues is to build a robust social network. The UK Mental Health Foundation found that a quarter of Brits of all ages feel emotionally unconnected to others and a third do not feel connected to the wider community.

The more isolated we are from other human beings, the higher our risk to developing a mental health illness. If we have a strong network of friends, family and colleagues that we can talk to when things are stressful, we are much more likely to find ourselves in a more positive mental state. Having a strong support network, helps prevent our stresses from spiralling into more serious issues. It's important to take the time to develop and nurture these relationships. We are social creatures and are at our best when we have others around us.

Conclusion

7. Conclusion

Stress is not all bad; we need a small amount of stress to motivate and drive us, but too much can be detrimental to both our physical and mental health. The first step is understanding what the effects of stress are on our bodies and brains. Secondly, it's recognising our own personal stress symptoms. Recognising these early, means we are better equipped to deal with them and they are less likely to spiral into something more serious. Finally it's learning to deal with stress in a more effective way. Learning techniques to manage our stress, can be vital to maintaining good physical and mental health. If we commit to reducing our stress levels, we may find we have more energy, we're more productive in our work and we're able to maintain healthier relationships, both at work and at home.

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